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SUBJECT: Defending the "Citizen's Revolution:" Correa's neighborhood committees

REF: 09 QUITO 716

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REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa touched off a storm of debate after using his August 10 inauguration speech to the people to propose the formation of "Committees for the Defense of the Revolution" (CDRs). Opposition commentators accused Correa and his party of creating state-sponsored vigilante groups, repressing political debate, and intimidating the citizenry. Even those generally supportive of Correa expressed alarm. In his weekly radio address, Correa scoffed at the accusations, saying that the press deliberately misinterpreted the proposal in order to attack his administration, and that the proposal was actually nothing new. National Assembly queries to the Ministry of Politics, asking the legal basis of such committees, have been ignored. Meanwhile, competing committees have formed in Guayaquil, some supporting Mayor Jaime Nebot and others supporting Correa and the PAIS movement. The CDRs do not currently appear to benefit from government resources or public funds, and are presently not much more than political organizations of Correa's PAIS movement and other like-minded groups. End Summary.

Running the idea up the flagpole

¶2. (U) At one of several inauguration events August 10, this one aimed at the Ecuadorian people, President Rafael Correa stood with Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, Cuban President Raul Castro, and deposed Honduran President Manuel Zelaya, and announced his intention to form CDRs similar to those in Cuba and Venezuela. During his speech, Correa said that "the great challenge in this new phase of the revolution is to create in each household a revolutionary committee; in each neighborhood a committee to defend the national government." Although he did not give many details, the function of organizing these committees would fall to Minister of Politics Ricardo Patino.

¶3. (SBU) Well-respected academic and commentator Grace Jaramillo voiced concern, echoed widely in the press, that the groups would intimidate voters and serve to limit political freedoms rather than protect them. Similar lines of thinking appeared on various individual blogs and websites. Some of the negative reaction compared the CDRs to groups in fascist Germany organized to repress political dissent, and went on to tally examples of violence and vigilantism in Cuba and Venezuela, where such community organizations already exist.

14. (C) Monica Banegas, former Vice President of the Council for Citizen Participation and Social Control, told Emboffs that the CDRs are outside the citizen participation mechanisms envisioned by her organization. In her personal view, the groups were legitimate government bodies if the objective was to help citizens learn their rights and duties and how to participate in the various decision-making mechanisms available to them. However, if the CDRs were established primarily to defend one political ideology or another, the work was better left to the political parties and not the government.

15. (C) Carter Center project coordinator Camila Lanusse, who also follows civil society activity closely, was similarly wary of the role of the CDRs and their potential link to the Government. For the moment Lanusse believes the CDR proposal is mostly just talk or renamed election committees, and she sees no moves to "institutionalize" them with government funding or resources. She noted that if the Government got involved and used the organizations as a funnel for state funds or public benefits, then the committees would cease to have a true democratic or participatory function and become "just another arm of the government."

Correa clarifies; Patino doesn't

16. (SBU) In his weekly Saturday radio address on August 16, the first of his new administration, President Correa justified his proposal and accused the press of misleading the people by insinuating the plan meant arming the populace. Instead, the purpose of the CDRs, according to Correa, was to defend the Government from any intent to destabilize it. The point, he said, was to transform his political capital (coming off the electoral win) into a structured and mobilized organization. Using Zelaya's ouster and the failed coup attempt against Chavez as examples, Correa stated that "there are miniscule groups, with great economic power, that could destabilize the Government at any moment...We have great popular support, but if we don't have people who can take to the streets to defend their government, then [these groups] could easily destabilize us." However, Correa then insisted that the whole idea had been unnecessarily blown out of proportion by the press, since these groups already existed in the form of the campaign organizations and neighborhood self-help committees at the local level.

17. (U) On inauguration day, Correa identified Minister of Politics Ricardo Patino as the man responsible for initiating the organization of the CDRs. According to media reports, the National Assembly's Commission on Citizen Participation and Social Control met on September 10 to discuss, among other things, the legal and constitutional basis of the CDRs. The Assembly's Commission reportedly representatives asked Patino three times over the course of two weeks to appear before the Commission, but Patino apparently refused all requests. The media quotes him as retorting that questions submitted to him by center-left (and opposition) Assembly member Cesar Montufar "have nothing to do with the exercise of my official duties, but are about a private function" of PAIS.

A rose by another name?

18. (C) Meanwhile, in Guayaquil, PAIS campaign organizations are calling themselves CDRs and took to the streets for a visit by President Correa, holding banners in support of Correa's call to sanction media outlets. Mayor Jaime Nebot, who opposes Correa, has his own neighborhood political committees. In a speech to the local Chamber of Commerce on September 1, Nebot called on the more than 800 "popular committees" in Guayaquil to maintain their independence and to organize in support of all political viewpoints. Correa has every right to form committees, according to the mayor, and Guayaquil has the right to form committees to defend the autonomy of the city and to advance democratic rights. While in Guayaquil, Correa apparently recommended changing the name of the CDRs, since "defense" seemed to create confusion and anxiety, including among some in the Ecuadorian military. PAIS is now calling for the formation of "Committees of the People's Revolution" (Comites de la Revolucion Ciudadana) or CRCs.

19. (SBU) Committees previously formed by other movements in Guayaquil, some more than a decade ago, are also promising to defend the revolution and generally voicing the principles laid out in Correa's initial proposal. The leader of the Movimiento Bolivariano Alfarista (MBA), former militant Edgar Frias, told the newspaper "Hoy" that his organization will form 500 committees of 100-120 people each within 6 months to help defend Correa's "citizen's revolution," despite the financial difficulties his movement faces. MBA, formed in 2007, is attempting to attract participants with access to medical care and clinics, legal advice, low-cost food, and other benefits, all provided by volunteers and committee members. Similarly, the leader of an organization of neighborhood committees in Guayas that provides subsidized housing

to members - and has for 10 years - is quoted as saying "We will defend the project of the people's revolution. We will not permit a coup against the government."

110. (SBU) While their support is likely ideological, these left-leaning organizations may also be hoping to receive some benefit or favorable treatment from the government. For example, one MBA project to provide soy milk to adherents for free is waiting for a decision on a loan application with the National Financing Corporation, and for registration with the Provincial health department.

Comment

111. (SBU) Despite the hyperbole from both Government and opposition regarding the CDRs/CRCs, so far little new organizing appears to have taken place. Guayaquil's competing committees are nothing new, as Correa noted in the radio address, and so far do not appear to have any official financial support from the government. Patino is steadfastly refusing to explain himself to Montufar's committee, and we have heard no reports of CDRs forming in other communities. Unlike the government-supported organizations of Cuba and Venezuela, it may well be that Ecuadorian CDRs - or CRCs - will not develop beyond already-established grassroots political organizations.

CHRITTON